11: Murphy E-5 (1952-1953) 1958
SQ13 Mundurucu SQ13

V. MYTHOLOGY AND FOLKLORE

A COLLECTION of fifty-eight myths and folktales was recorded in the villages of Missão Velha and Cabruá. The latter community, one of the more conservative savannah settlements, was far more productive of traditional lore of all kinds and most of the material below was gathered there. Although this chapter represents the complete body of oral literature collected in the field, there is undoubtedly more available if a wider range of Mundurucú informants were to be sampled. Some myths, such as that of the origin of clans collected by Father Kruse,[1] were specifically sought, but were unknown to those questioned. Mundurucú mythology has undoubtedly undergone considerable attenuation, and these may be among the large number of stories no longer extant.

The older Mundurucú say that oral literature was formerly much more actively recounted and transmitted. During the evenings, the elders told tales to all the assembled men, and children were brought to listen. These sessions are no longer frequent, but considerable interest is still manifest among the listeners. A number of men and children and usually some women gathered around whenever I found an informant with a story. Indeed, without an audience the narrator would not put forth his best efforts. The delivery was always quite animated and was accompanied by vivid gestures, imitations of animals, and dialogues between the personages in the story. The audience gave full attention, and it was considered most disrespectful to create any diversion during the narration. All laughed readily and spontaneously at the appropriate passages, although many had heard the tale several times before.

The stories themselves range over a variety of subjects and are told for a number of purposes. They have been broken down into six major categories to provide continuity. This does not represent an attempt toward a systematic classification of the myths; actually the categories overlap considerably. For example, the animal tales are generally told for amusement, but they frequently explain the origins of certain species. On the other hand, the Karusakaibõ cycle is a true creation myth and is centered upon the activities of the principal culture hero. There are numerous passages in this myth cycle, however, that are considered highly humorous by both narrators and audiences, and in other incidents animals are also created. Similarly, a category of cosmological myths has been included, but there are several events in other tales that are also important to an understanding of Mundurucú cosmology.

Through all, there is a running theme of the importance of the animal world to Mundurucú society and of the close interrelation between the two. In many tales, animals either have the form of people or are able to take on this form. The mythology does more than explain the origin of animal species, for in almost all cases the various animals are transformed people. That the species had their origin in the human world tends to reinforce the special significance given them in ceremonies and the supernatural belief system.

This affinity between animals and humans will be evident in the saga of

[1] Kruse, 1954, pp. 56–57.